

Intensive Programs of Growth—the Path to Sustainability

By the end of the Five Year Plan, intensive programs of growth had been launched in nearly 300 clusters on all five continents. The cycles of activity that the friends carried out followed a similar pattern, but the results have varied according to the type of cluster, the nature of the planning, the level of involvement of the believers, the effectiveness of the teaching work, and the closeness of the collaboration among the institutions in the cluster. All of these variables affect the potential of such a program to achieve significant enrollments. Beyond this, the challenge is not only to bring in new believers, but also to attain a rate of growth that will gradually accelerate and to carry out a systematic process through which new friends are steadily consolidated. This dynamic underpins the sustainability that is the aim of an intensive program of growth.

A look at the intensive programs of growth under way reveals patterns of progress that involve forward movement and setbacks, relative strengths and weaknesses, and uneven rates of expansion. How could it be otherwise in an organic process that is based on learning? The believers have met the challenges of striving for sustainability in various ways. As always, the experience gained in the most advanced clusters, specifically those whose growth programs have completed several cycles of activity, provides the most valuable learning about how to overcome certain obstacles, when to modify approaches, and what elements to reinforce.

This edition of the newsletter will be the first in a series that over time will explore some insights gained in a number of clusters regarding the factors that contribute to the sustainability of intensive programs of growth. In this newsletter we will consider four critical issues: 1) the challenge and benefit of decentralization, 2) the need for more effective teaching teams, 3) the importance of a strong, continuing institute process, and 4) the necessity of involving youth.

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Decentralization: Focusing on Neighborhoods. *Managing activities that involve hundreds of people spread over a large geographic area needs careful organization and supervision. The friends are experimenting with approaches that involve decentralizing the work and distributing responsibilities more widely. The neighborhood has proved to be a natural arena of activity in a cluster.*

United States

In the **New York City** cluster, for the past two cycles of the intensive program of growth the neighborhood Nineteen Day Feasts have been used to promote decentralization of core activities and to encourage the community to focus on teaching. The Local Spiritual Assembly and the Area Teaching Committee (ATC) have collaborated in ensuring that a portion of the Feast consultation is devoted to a discussion of growth, sometimes with a specific theme. The ATC has designated individuals in each neighborhood who facilitate that discussion in their respective Feasts. The friends are encouraged to talk about the significance of the stage of the

current cycle of their intensive program of growth, and they reflect on the citywide and neighborhood statistics that have been gathered since the last Feast. Individuals are also encouraged to share their teaching stories and reports from teaching team activities. Core activities that are about to begin are announced so that others can share this information with seekers in the neighborhood. Although this use of the decentralized Feasts to promote a greater focus on growth in the neighborhoods is only recent, the results have been positive in terms of creating greater awareness of the progress of the intensive program of growth and of fostering an increase in core activities and teaching.

India

In the **Bihar Sharif** cluster the full-time institute coordinators and secretary of the Area Teaching Committee (called area facilitator) work closely together and constantly travel throughout the cluster visiting the friends. The roads are poor and they must walk or travel by bicycle—often going 20 kilometers a day. Each community in the cluster is visited at least once a week. The coordinators and facilitator share information weekly and do not draw sharp lines between their prescribed duties. So, for example, the area facilitator might visit the Ruhi Institute Book 1 study circles to encourage the participants to initiate regular devotional gatherings, and the coordinators may communicate with the teaching teams to ensure that new believers and seekers are introduced to the institute process. This collaboration and constant tending to the needs of the cluster has resulted in a steadily increasing number of friends completing the sequence of courses as well as hundreds of new believers.

The agencies of Bihar Sharif have also developed a systematic method for decentralizing and promoting the growth process within the cluster. When an area has two or three Bahá'ís residing within it, the cluster agencies assist the believers to plan a meeting to which they can invite their friends, neighbors, relatives, and other interested acquaintances. Believers from other areas of the cluster assist the resident friends with carrying out the activity. This gathering serves as an introductory fireside and usually results in the establishment of a new Bahá'í children's class and perhaps other core activities. Through this simple, planned approach the process begins, and with time and loving support from the cluster agencies, seekers declare and the area evolves into a strong, contributing segment of the cluster. So far, this has been tried in seven areas and generated active Bahá'í groups in four of them.

Mongolia

The **Murun (Khuvsgul)** cluster covers a large rural area with a multitude of believers and has three full-time institute coordinators. It was found that the distances within the cluster and the lack of a good communication system made it difficult for any one coordinator to oversee a particular core activity throughout the entire cluster. Therefore, the friends devised a different approach to organizing the work of the coordinators. Rather than each one coordinating a single core activity, their duties are divided among them geographically. The cluster is now divided into nine communities and each coordinator oversees all of the core activities in three communities. In addition, the cluster has a full-time secretary of the Cluster Growth Committee and one assistant.

Kenya

An example of a well-managed cluster is **Tiriki West** in rural Kenya. Since it covers 92 square kilometres and has 42 functioning Local Spiritual Assemblies, keeping track of its more than 2,500 believers is a formidable task. The cluster institute coordinator travels by bicycle

from village to village to attend study circles, support the tutors, and provide advice and encouragement to other key believers. This constant monitoring and assisting is a major factor in the success of the cluster. It is part of a systematic and decentralized approach to the monitoring of the institute process that includes all levels of the institute.

The process begins with close interaction between the institute coordinator and the study circle tutors. When a tutor begins to facilitate a new study circle, he or she is asked to inform the institute coordinator of the date the course began and the projected date of its completion, so as to avoid the problem of study circles taking too long for the study of a book and participants losing interest. The institute coordinator pays a visit to one of the meetings of the new study circle and ensures that it has all the materials it needs. Such visits enable the institute coordinator to work with the tutors to assist them to improve. Quarterly reflection meetings of tutors are then held at the cluster level and these foster an enhancement of their skills. At the next level, cluster coordinators meet every three months with the national institute coordinator in order to ensure a continuing evolution in their understanding of the institute process and a steady development of their capabilities.

This efficient, systematic approach is reaping an abundant harvest in Tiriki West. As of October 2006, it had 116 children's classes serving 696 children, 30 junior youth groups with a total of 362 participants, and 215 regular devotional gatherings attended by 1,310 persons. The number of those actively engaging in teaching activities, 210, is almost twice the number of those who have completed Book 7. The teaching work has also been decentralized, and the team leaders live in the neighborhoods served by their teams. More than 400 home visits were carried out during Tiriki West's sixth cycle, and between Riḍván 2005 and Riḍván 2006 there were 164 declarations, 89 of whom were quickly integrated into core activities.

Improving the Effectiveness of Teaching Teams. The friends in a number of urban clusters have found that the most effective teaching teams are those which reach out to neighborhoods with receptive populations. Other lessons have also been learned about teaching teams. Generally it has been found from experience that teams which are too large are unwieldy. Smaller teams are more likely to meet and to carry out the teaching work.

Azerbaijan

The believers in the **Baku** cluster, who had the distinction of establishing the first intensive program of growth during the last Five Year Plan, recently completed their eighth cycle. The results reflected a marked increase in momentum relative to the previous few cycles where the level of participation in teaching had dwindled to only a few active teams. The major catalyst for this change was a conscious effort to decentralize the formation of teaching teams to the level of the neighborhood rather than from across the cluster. The cluster agencies realized that when teaching teams were formed among believers from across the cluster, it was difficult for them to gather and collaborate effectively. The approach of organizing the teams according to neighborhoods generated enthusiasm and led to the formation of 15 teaching teams, 12 of which remained active. These were made up largely of young families.

One example was that of a teaching team comprising a mother and her two daughters who are youth. The team's efforts began by visiting the local playground, where the family is known, and initiating a junior youth group. This led to a study circle that the daughters conducted mainly with older siblings of those in the junior youth group, which, in turn, provided a natural opportunity for the mother to establish a study circle with parents of both the junior youth and

the older siblings. In this case, the teaching teams extended their efforts into the three-month consolidation phase. Community development has also been enhanced by neighborhood Feasts and devotional meetings, which have replaced many community-wide activities in this large metropolitan area. The result has been an increase in overall attendance.

Whereas the previous two cycles had resulted in a total of four enrollments and 75 seekers involved in core activities, the outcomes of the eighth cycle included 19 declarations and 113 active seekers.

Malawi

Each of the teaching teams in the **Mulanje** cluster includes members who have completed Book 2 and those who have completed Book 6. When possible, they also try to ensure that a tutor—someone who has completed the sequence—is on the team and available to serve as a tutor. Until the seventh cycle, which began in September 2006, the teams were large with as many as 12 to 20 members, but it was found that many of these friends did not actively participate. The size of the teams was then reduced to three or four friends. Most of the team members are youth. What proved effective in the seventh cycle was for half of the teams to carry out door-to-door teaching to families in new areas, while the other teams made home visits to areas where teaching had occurred in the previous cycles. The latter teams were able to follow up with those individuals who had previously expressed interest but had not yet declared or joined core activities.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Lubumbashi is an urban cluster with 11 Local Spiritual Assemblies and is located in the southern part of the country. Its intensive program of growth is currently in its eighth cycle. In earlier cycles the teams were made up of Bahá'ís from the same Local Spiritual Assembly, who then taught within their Assembly's area of jurisdiction. The flow of information was poor, and the Cluster Growth Committee had difficulty following what was happening. In an effort to improve the rate of growth, as of the sixth cycle the Committee made several changes in regard to the teams: they were now composed of friends from several Local Assembly areas; teaching was focused on the receptive neighborhoods targeted by the Committee, rather than on all of the Local Assembly areas; the number of people on each team increased from the two or three participants that had previously been on each team; and the Cluster Committee began organizing consultative meetings with all of the teachers before they set out during the expansion phase. All of these steps contributed to an increase in the effectiveness of the teams.

India

Children's classes and junior youth groups have proved to be excellent portals in India for gaining new participants for study circles because they provide an opportunity to reach out to new families. This is well illustrated by the recent expansion phase of the intensive program of growth in the capital city, **New Delhi**. In May 2006, after several cycles with only fair results, the community decided to make a consistent, intense effort to carry out children's classes, junior youth classes, and study circles. It identified six neighborhoods and then set about establishing classes for children and junior youth, primarily with the children of non-Bahá'í families. The Bahá'ís worked hard to make the classes regular and to follow the prescribed curricula. This careful approach created a strong bond among the children's class teachers, the junior youth animators, and the tutors within each of the six neighborhoods. Of course, an essential component of the classes was service. As the parents witnessed the transformation in their

children and were impressed by their acts of service, they became more open to the Faith. During the expansion phase of the seventh cycle (January 2007), large devotional gatherings were held in each of the six neighborhoods. The children and junior youth chanted prayers, presented skits, and gave speeches about what they had learned. The speeches of the junior youth in particular moved the hearts of the parents and the others present. After the children were given refreshments and excused, the adults at each gathering were subdivided into small groups of five or six, and teachers positioned in each. The teachers began to teach the Faith directly to their small group. One participant related what happened.

This was unprecedented for the Delhi community. We had no experience in doing this. However, we had made up our minds—and did it with many, many prayers and all the courage and audacity that we could muster. The adults were divided into small groups, and each group had a Bahá'í who directly taught them the Faith with the help of the “teaching album.” We found the album to be a very effective tool. It prevented us from losing our focus and enabled us to present the Faith in a logical sequence and to quote from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

In our previous cycles of activity we had large-scale devotional gatherings; however, they were not followed by direct teaching in small groups. We had talks—and the approach was rather “impersonal”—hence these events had resulted only in increasing our community of interest. In this expansion phase, the direct teaching in small groups allowed for a more personal and intimate atmosphere. The teacher sat with five or six individuals and constantly had eye contact with them. The seekers felt more comfortable in a small group to ask questions and were at ease when they were asked whether they would like to enroll as Bahá'ís.

As a result of this direct teaching approach in neighborhoods, during the intensive two-week expansion phase of the seventh cycle, 206 people were enrolled in the Faith in Delhi. During the four cycles of the previous year, this cluster had a total of about 100 enrollments. Most of the new believers are parents of the children and junior youth attending the Bahá'í classes, and they have now swelled the numbers of those entering Book 1. Because close working relationships had already developed among the teachers of the children's classes, the junior youth animators, and the tutors, establishing study circles with the new believers in the six targeted neighborhoods is being accomplished with relative ease.

The Task of Building an Ever-Expanding Pyramid of Human Resources. Communities are encountering challenges as they endeavor to continually expand the institute process, an element essential to sustaining growth. Various challenges need to be addressed. For example, some communities have exhausted their pool of believers and so must turn more to attracting the wider community, yet are uncertain how to achieve this. Others have difficulty stimulating the participants to move from one course to the next. Finally, numerous communities find that a significant number of those who complete the full sequence of courses are nonetheless hesitant to tutor a study circle.

New Zealand

Finding new people to go through the sequence is the first challenge. In the **Auckland** cluster it was discovered that when core activities became more centered on neighborhoods, it was easier to find additional participants for the institute process and the participation levels increased. In particular, the neighbourhood focus made it easier to involve less active believers.

Colombia

Moving a steady stream of friends through the sequence is an additional challenge. The **Norte de Bolívar** cluster has started to have tutors give an overview of the institute process and the full sequence of courses when a new Book 1 study circle begins. This gives the participants a vision of what they are embarking upon, that is, that they are able to engage in a series of courses and not just the study of one book. In providing an overview of the knowledge and skills they will be gaining, the tutors also explain how the participants will be carrying out acts of service with each course. Furthermore, the friends in this cluster are developing greater flexibility. For example, if the study circle participants need some time between the completion of one course and the outset of the next, the institute coordinator plans accordingly.

Kiribati

Arising to carry out the acts of service associated with the institute courses is a question of motivation. At a reflection meeting in the **South Tarawa** cluster, the importance of arising to serve as tutors was highlighted. The cluster institute coordinator spoke of how the tutors were “the key to growth.” He shared the example of a village community in the cluster that was quite weak until tutors were raised up and deployed; now there is a great deal of enthusiasm and the friends there are beginning to meet their goals. Two believers recounted their own experiences in the hope of motivating others:

First tutor: “. . . the thing needed is whole-hearted devotion to service and love for the Faith and Bahá'u'lláh. I am not a (fully-trained) tutor, for I have yet to complete all the courses. I've only done the earlier courses, but in spite of that I tried to do what I could with the youth and I found that the work I did bore fruit, for the youth have arisen to serve . . .”

Second tutor: “. . . I was inspired to establish a study circle after the last cluster meeting at the Marakei Mwaneaba in Betio. At that meeting the believers in Bonriki asked for a tutor to help them . . . I thought about their request and I made up my mind to answer that need . . . I am disabled . . ., but because of my desire to fulfill the need expressed and because I had received a little bit of training as a tutor . . . these things caused me to arise and leave my house and live in Bonriki to establish a study circle . . .”

Practically speaking, motivating those trained as tutors involves accompanying them until they have the confidence and capacity to carry out the practices in the books so that they can then assist others to do the same. In Kiribati focus is being placed on accompanying youth to become effective tutors. Once they are motivated and confident, the youth demonstrate the energy and enthusiasm to serve as tutors as well as children's class teachers and junior youth animators.

Turkey

The Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members serving Turkey have recently encouraged the concept of “active refresher” meetings. These help the friends taking a refresher course to identify the obstacles that are preventing them from carrying out a particular act of service and find solutions to overcome these impediments. They then immediately act on that refresher training the same weekend. The following first-hand account from the **Istanbul Anatolia** cluster demonstrates how effective this approach can be.

We implemented the methods we had learned the day before from our Counsellor during the preparation activity which we are calling “active refreshing.” We started out by trying to determine the obstacles. The participants were initially asked whether it was a problem for them to make home visits or to get an appointment. The response was that there was no such problem. The next question was whether there was any trouble in carrying the topics to a spiritual level during the visits. Neither was there such a problem. The next question was whether they had difficulties in inviting the participants to Book 1 and the reply was “Yes.” We decided to work on inviting people to the institute courses and the Faith.

We studied the second paragraph of “Reflection on Growth No. 14.” We gained an understanding of the term “building up a global community based on justice and love” and decided to explain this concept when inviting seekers to the Ruhi courses.

The following day the friends immediately set about organizing home visits to practice the skills learned in the refresher course. They not only enlisted more participants in the institute courses but also enrolled new believers.

***Involving Youth in the Process.** Universally it is being reported that youth are one of the most receptive of all target populations and that they are best attracted to the Faith through the efforts of other youth. In most advanced clusters, it was the youth who first embraced the institute process. Moreover, in many of the intensive programs of growth, youth are the most active teachers during the expansion phase.*

Australia

In **Perth**, a university student initiated an intensive Book 7 study circle during the school holiday for other university and high school students who wished to complete the sequence. Taking advantage of this gap in the academic calendar resulted in 14 new enthusiastic tutors—all youth.

Cambodia

In Cambodia particular emphasis has been given to raising up active youth as servants of the Cause. By focusing systematically on children and junior youth, in a relatively short time these young people grow up and become capable of taking on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. In the **Battambang** cluster, once the junior youth became youth, they were trained to teach those younger than themselves—and now the cluster has a growing cadre of well-trained young adults. This approach also facilitates the seamless movement of junior youth into the main sequence, because when they see how the older youth are given responsibility as children’s class teachers and junior youth animators, they want to emulate their example and complete the sequence themselves.

Vanuatu

During school holidays junior youth camps have often been organized in the **Efate** cluster and these have been run by the older Bahá’í youth. Now special camps are being held for those who have either just turned 15, or are about to, in order to introduce them to Book 1. Not only have the camps and classes for junior youth successfully attracted that age group and set them on course for continuing with the institute process, but they have also provided the older youth

with a valuable role to play in serving the community and advancing the Five Year Plan. The majority of the 16 new believers enrolled during the most recent cycle in Efate were participants in the junior youth program.

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